

Laksa to lamingtons: ingredients for cross cultural learning

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Abstract:

The international students at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) enhance their studies with a range of practice-focused assignments, vibrant multi-cultural activities and collaborative industry links. These can range from work experience at the Sydney Opera House to cheering local footy teams with “cultural interpreters” who are also classmates. This paper explores some of the ingredients for cross cultural learning used by Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) students, using the *two-way symmetrical model* taught in the Faculty’s Public Communication program. The HSS Faculty is one of nine at UTS. The university currently has international students from over 110 countries. Examples are given to show how international students utilise this model to engage with community and university stakeholders. Students who are at first unfamiliar with Australian socio-cultural, political and economic contexts can tap into a range of challenging opportunities that lead them out of their comfort zones into dynamic professional and cultural networking exchanges. These exchanges have been found to result in enriched academic outcomes. The *boundary spanner* role played by the HSS Faculty’s International Student Adviser is also discussed.

Key words: two-way symmetrical communication; boundary spanner

Introduction:

Anyone who works for an organization operates within a complex network of relationships among employees, groups and publics. Communication is a vital link to maintaining open and ethical relationships. A reflective approach that looks at society’s changing standards and values, as well as an individual’s worldview, is needed today.

At UTS, a range of relationship-building activities has proven successful in helping international students overcome culture shock, link academic theory to practice and enrich their Australian educational experiences. These activities have provided them with the opportunity to exchange opinions, insights and worldviews with Australian members of the UTS and Sydney communities.

These activities came about in 2003, through the university’s strategic planning process. UTS decided that building a *culture of connection* within the whole UTS community should be a priority. The key strategies included provision of:

- co-curricular activities and other means of fostering connections which involve students, staff and members of the external community in support of academic development, research and community engagement;
- support for the development of environments which are culturally inclusive and provide opportunities for the development of social and cultural leadership skills; and
- development and implementation of an approach to internationalization at UTS, which reflects the UTS statement of international purpose and the cultural and ethnic diversity of students and staff.

The advocacy role of International Student Adviser was created by the HSS Faculty to help initiate and implement new services for students in response to identified needs. These ranged from difficulties that some international students were experiencing in becoming integrated into the broader UTS community, problems in coping with culture shock, the lack of organized programs for helping Australian students become acquainted with their international classmates and the perceived lack of access to Australian and Sydney culture.

This International Student Adviser role helps the Faculty recognize and facilitate important relationships, an opinion based on two *systems concepts*: (a) organisations have boundaries and (b) certain people serve as “boundary spanners” (Thompson, 1967). Borrowing Thompson’s notion, the International Student Adviser

can be described as a boundary spanner between the HSS Faculty's stakeholders, which include staff, international and local students, potential employers and community resources.

Of course, various organisational members can serve as boundary spanners. They are people who can understand various points of view because of their role responsibilities, experiences and skills. They can explain the process of decision-making and regulations to newcomers. They know how to communicate, and sometimes translate, information from one group to another (McElreath, 1993, p 14).

Specifically, the HSS Faculty's nominated boundary spanner - the International Student Adviser - assists in identifying appropriate university and community resources for staff as well as students. In this role, the International Student Adviser uses a practical communication model (taught in the Faculty's Public Communication program): the *two-way symmetrical model*.

The theory and rationale:

The two-way symmetrical model comes from the field of public relations, and is held up by scholar James Grunig as the ideal because it involves negotiation with an organization's various publics to arrive at mutually acceptable and beneficial policies and ways of doing business (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004, p 13). The problem with the ideal is that negotiations also depend on a balance of power that is not always present with some publics, such as university lecturers and students. This is particularly true outside the USA (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004, p 13).

In the two-way symmetrical model, the publics' views are respected and are given the same importance as the views of the organization sponsoring the public relations work (in this case, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences).

Countries attempting to use the two-way symmetrical model for best practices often find culture gets in the way of equalizing relationships. The two-way concept involves developing mutual understandings so that even when a public (e.g. students) may not agree with management (e.g. lecturers), at least there is an understanding of why management is saying or doing what it is. This can only occur if the public affected appreciates management's position, and if the culture is not too hierarchical to permit such practice (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004, p 13).

Culture not only influences how public relations is practiced, but ultimately it defines what public relations is (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2004, p 358). The two-way symmetrical model can provide a framework for relationship-building between students and other HSS stakeholders from varied cultural backgrounds. These stakeholders may aim to address such current UTS problems as (a) students who are unfamiliar with online teaching concepts, and who are culturally uncomfortable asking for help of strangers, (b) local and international students clashing over group work, and (c) students from Collectivist cultures resisting integration activities, unless they can go with groups of friends (which they may not yet have made).

Because inclusiveness on campus is one important goal of UTS, a variety of activities are offered to help the transition and to meet personal preference choices. Activities are also gauged on whether or not opportunities for dialogue exist between the Faculty and its publics.

Dialogue is considered to be a critical factor in helping students cope with new situations, and an emerging global culture, for several reasons. These include:

- international students often feel isolated, and lonely;
- they lack local contacts for work experience and social interaction;
- they are unfamiliar with Australian culture and contexts, so may not tap into a full, rich experience; and
- teaching staff may feel over-burdened, if unfamiliar with teaching in a culturally diverse classroom.

In applying this model to international student services, the publics that HSS Faculty is attempting to build relationships with include:

- International HSS students;
- UTS staff who interface with HSS international students;
- Local HSS students who can provide support, or who can learn from international students (e.g. exchanging language skills); and
- Sydney community and HSS alumni (e.g. who can provide work experience and “host family” situations).

The two-way symmetrical model is a fundamental tool used in building effective relationships with these stakeholders. It involves a rhetorical view that presumes, in terms of their right to speak, all parties are symmetrical (Heath, 2001: 35). That is, they have equal right to speak out. The cross cultural challenge involved for the International Student Adviser is that just because the HSS Faculty and its international students have entered into a relationship does not mean that they perceive themselves to be equal partners in this relationship nor that they are like-minded about those relationships.

The goal is to foster enough opportunities for dialogue, through a variety of activities and initiatives, so that eventually the majority of stakeholders will feel compelled (and comfortable) to seek help and support as needed, and to share their views when called upon.

In this paper, the trialed HSS relationship-building activities and services are discussed.

Linking relationship-building theory to practice:

The HSS Faculty has developed the following initiatives, in conjunction with UTS Student Services, the International Office and the Institute of International Studies' Exchange Scheme:

- **Tandem** - incoming international students are matched with “local” or experienced international students in a “buddy” program. Named for the bicycle built for two, Tandem offers a special way of extending networks and making friends. Tandem pairs are given a “Sojourner” guide at orientation (which includes cross cultural adjustment information), and are provided with several opportunities throughout the semester to re-connect. It is ultimately up to each Tandem pair to determine how often they will meet. Exchange or Study Abroad students join HSS students in this initiative. Tandem was launched in October 2003. In the first semester of the program, Tandem hosted 50 pairs of “buddies”. Now in its second semester, there are more than 150 pairs. Anecdotal research has shown that students who know someone in Sydney before arriving seem to socialize mainly with them. Some of these students find new friends and have good social integration. Those who don't know anyone before arriving are often lonely. They are aware of Tandem, but don't feel comfortable joining unless their friends join, too. Facilitating interpersonal relationships is a cultural challenge in developing Tandem.

“I have gotten so much out of having a Tandem study buddy,” says Petra, an undergraduate journalism student from Sweden. “I asked to be matched with an Australian who also speaks Japanese, so I get to practice English and Japanese –and have learned how to eat sushi and lamingtons, too!”

- Coffee and Conversation - one of the most popular Tandem activities. Funding from the Registrar provides one free coffee per person at weekly, informal networking sessions. Held weekly in cafes on two campuses, these have grown from a handful of students to more than 40 “regulars”. The HSS International Student Adviser is joined by Student Services staff in hosting these popular gatherings, and fostering interaction between the students. Anecdotal research has shown that students who attended school where instruction was in English before coming to UTS seem to adjust to the UTS academic and social environment more easily than those who experience an English-speaking environment for the first time upon arriving at UTS.

“I had no idea what the English words were for Australian animals like wombats or kangaroos,” admits German-born Gerhard, 24. “The coffees give me a chance to ask Australian students about things like that. And I like meeting other international students, and learning about other people’s countries.”

- HSS Faculty welcome – this cultural and academic awareness session is held at the beginning of each semester, and features a panel of faculty resources discussing everything from Australian classroom etiquette to cultural barriers that can affect group assignments. The purpose of the session is to increase international students’ understanding of the cross cultural experience and to identify strategies that will assist personal and cross cultural adjustment. Key staff members are on hand to provide insights into specific program areas.

“It was nice to get information from experienced Australian students,” says Hanne, a postgraduate student from Norway. “The networking time at the orientation session helped me know what to expect, and what was expected of me.”

- City to Surf Fun Run – this annual Sydney event attracts more than 60,000 runners from around the world, and this year included a cohort of more than 100 newly arrived international students on the 225-member UTS team.

“Sydney is such a big, famous city,” declares Lise, 26. “It felt so special to be able to take part in an event like this. It was great!”

- UTSOnline site - HSS international students may access an International Students Network designated site 24 hours per day for information ranging from city-wide entertainment to a discussion board, where students can tap one another for tips on everything from travel to housing. The site also includes work experience postings and links to the university’s careers service. Students from countries that don’t incorporate electronic or Internet use in the classroom tend not to take advantage of this resource. They are drawn instead to the Coffee and Conversation gatherings. Anecdotal research also shows that the majority of undergraduates appreciate online teaching. It is not yet clear how often they may access online resources. Some seem to prefer face-to-face instruction. Generally, it seems that students like having resources online, in case they study at night and can’t access fellow students or lecturers for consultations.

“My university in China doesn’t use online, so I didn’t understand how or why to use this,” explains Wanyi, 25. “Now that I have been in Australia for one year, I feel more comfortable about asking for help. And I probably will use the online section for introducing myself next semester.”

- Weekly e-newsletter - a combined “high tech, high touch” communication channel. The International Student Adviser emails notices about community events, invitations and announcements weekly. Students are invited to share accomplishments and activities (these have included requests for support of a Thai beauty queen in a local contest, and invitations to participate in one another’s National Day festivities).

“I always read this,” Anja, 26, says. “It’s short and interesting. I forward it to my friends, and we try to regularly do at least one of the community activities that are listed. We would never know about such events on our own.”

- Industry coaches - international students having difficulty with disciplinary subjects are matched with retired industry professionals, who coach them in industry jargon, attend industry events with them, and serve as cross cultural communication bridges. Anecdotal research shows that there is the perception among European or North American students that Asian students who have not experienced an education taught in English have greater difficulty coping with group assignments and that they are “allowed” to pass even though “they don’t understand the content of the course”. Some non-native English speaking students on the other hand feel discriminated against in the classroom, especially when it comes to group work. They expect much more involvement from teaching staff. Industry coaches can complement Tandem buddies’ support by discussing such differences.

“Even though I worked as a journalist in Vietnam, I had a very hard time with my news writing classes at UTS,” admits Trong, 34. “The teachers talk about Australian people I don’t know. Garth helps me with my English, and we talk about the news.”

- Field trips - that introduce international students to non-profit community projects and industry professionals take place throughout the semester. These range from participating in TV studio audiences to volunteering with such events as the Paralympians’ 2004 welcome home parade.

“It was such a surprise to find out that the organizer of the city’s major events is a UTS student,” says Sandra, a French Public Communication student. “I could see how learning how to network really helps me get work experience.”

- Career workshops - because approaches to potential employers and work placement opportunities differ from country to country, the HSS Faculty organizes workshops on interviewing and resume writing. These are held in conjunction with the UTS Careers Service, and feature briefings by industry experts as well. At these sessions, employers point out how international students can use their unique skill sets (e.g. languages) as an asset. In addition, the International Student Adviser provides one-on-one work experience placement advice, and maintains a database of employers who actively seek a culturally diverse workforce.

“I realized that I had to be very assertive if I wanted an internship,” says Martine, 21. “Lots of companies don’t want international students, because they think we won’t speak English or won’t understand Australian values. The workshops help us understand how to approach Australian companies.”

- Farewell party - the HSS international students join forces with Tandem, Exchange and Study Abroad students in a rollicking event that features the sharing of experiential anecdotes and lucky draw prizes from around the world. Students have the opportunity to place anonymous recommendations in a Suggestion Box, and are de-briefed on their UTS and Sydney experiences.

“I met lots of new people at the farewell party,” says Swedish student, Ylla. “It brought together students from other program areas.”

Benefits of relationship-building initiatives:

- Increase in word-of-mouth referrals by students to their peers back home.
- HSS staff actively contributes to the university’s strategic plan, by assisting students to resolve problems, which could impede successful completion of their study programs.
- Students receive more personalized, culturally appropriate attention.
- Alumni and community members assist in ensuring that students obtain a positive image of Australia and its educational opportunities.
- HSS staff (who speak more than 22 languages) enjoys sharing their knowledge of university and community resources, and gain personal satisfaction in helping develop internationalized teaching and learning tools.

- Students engage more fully with staff and community members, and enrich their stay in Sydney by participating more fully with everything on offer.

Ingredients for a successful cross cultural learning recipe for the International Student Adviser:

- Be aware. Don't assume you understand the nuances of every culture – pay attention to non-verbal cues, which give insight into the process of cross cultural communication.
- Try to look at the situation from a 'visitor perspective' – find a cultural mentor.
- Identify experts within the university and community, who can help you accurately assess potential resources and action steps to help the student and/or staff person.
- Establish a network of university colleagues who play a similar advisory role; meet regularly to discuss common concerns, identify trends and lead change.
- Develop community contacts with like-minded individuals, groups and professional associations who will help you provide nurturing, rewarding opportunities for international students.
- Maintain a regular flow of communication with key stakeholders; ensure that you are in the loop with policy decisions that may impact international students.
- Evaluate processes throughout the semester, to ensure that your communication channels are effective and meet the two-way symmetrical communication goal.
- Compile teaching and learning tools that will assist casual tutors and new academics to be better equipped for different approaches to learning.

Challenges for the International Student Adviser:

- Having limited time and budget to meet the needs of a growing international student population.
- Identifying like-minded staff in all faculties, so that a network of International Student Advisers can work together in identifying trends and issues -- and finding solutions.
- Informing and motivating staff at all levels about international students' needs and available resources.
- Overcoming cultural barriers toward interaction (e.g. Asian students who have been taught to study, study, study, without recognition of the value in mixing social and extra-curricular activities).
- Finding motivations for Australian students to interact with their international classmates (e.g. the most popular motivation is language study, for students going on Exchange).
- Locating appropriate work placement opportunities, where employers/mentors appreciate and utilize the attributes brought by international students.
- Reaching the marginalized (introverted, shy, pessimistic) students who do not feel comfortable socializing – and who would probably benefit most from the services provided by the HSS Faculty, in conjunction with UTS Student Services.

Measurements of success:

In order to ensure that the HSS Faculty's two-way symmetrical communication model is effective, a variety of measurement tools are used. To date, evaluation has been largely anecdotal although focus groups have been held at the end of each semester and a feedback forum is available online. Attendance numbers are also compared to similar events held in previous semesters. Subject feedback forms also help gather useful information, as do graduate satisfaction surveys.

Currently underway are one-on-one interviews with international students from all faculties, and a Web-based survey is planned for Summer 2004. Incoming international students are being surveyed on their expectations, and will be followed up during the Autumn 2005 semester to see if expectations have been met. Data from this research is expected to guide strategic support services plans, and assess whether the following initiatives, among others, should be pursued:

- Developing a mature age network (anecdotal evidence shows that this group experiences very different challenges, from single parenting to study habits).

- Providing storage facilities and rummage sales for household goods, so that departing international students can sell their goods with incoming students (who are expected to feel at home that much more quickly).
- Exploring partnerships with community programs such as Homeshare NSW, which brings older and younger people together to support each other – the older person provides free accommodation in exchange for receiving 10 hours of help around the home per week. This environment may be especially useful to students from cultures that revere their elders, and can also help students who wish to practice their English.

The International Student Adviser must always remain conscious of the principles of effective communication when exploring such initiatives, by:

- being *two-way and responsive* – communication works best if it is two-way, because people are more likely to listen to us if we listen to them; and
- being *receiver-oriented* – it is not what our message does to the listener but what the listener does with our message that determines our success as communicators
- being *comprehensive* – make sure that everyone who has an interest in the project is included in the communication, and ensure that communication flows upwards, downwards and laterally (Johnston & Zawawi, 2004, p 178-79).

Conclusion:

In this paper the term *two-way symmetrical communication* has been briefly described, and the suggestion has been made that this theoretical model can be adapted for use by any academic discipline.

Secondly, descriptions have been provided of the many tactics in which the two-way symmetrical model can manifest itself, including work-based learning, community engagement and electronic communication channels.

Thirdly, the term *boundary spanner* has been defined, and has been applied to the role of the HSS Faculty's International Student Adviser. The real benefits of having a nominated person in this role have been illustrated. These can include greater student ownership of the cross cultural learning process, more participative (and effective) dialogue between university stakeholders, and greater variety of professional and community experience for international students.

Lastly, ingredients for an International Student Adviser's recipe for successful cross cultural learning are recommended. Whether you are preparing laksa or lamingtons, a dash of awareness mixed with great contacts and seasoned with a regular flow of two-way communication will result in a great dish!

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